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Paul Ryan's Catholicism and the Poor

Acts coerced by government, no matter how beneficial or well-intentioned, cannot be moral.

By ANTONY DAVIES
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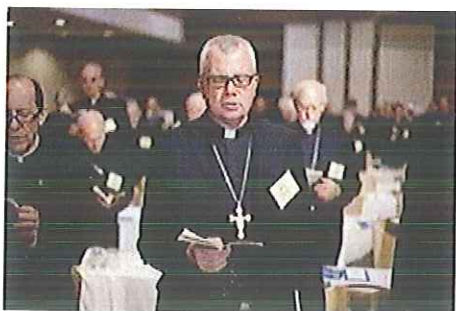
Someone is twisting the Catholic Church's teachings on caring for the poor, but it isn't Paul Ryan. His controversial budgetary ideas demonstrate that he has a better grasp of Catholic social thought than do many of the American Catholic bishops.

The culmination of centuries of theological and philosophical thought, the church's teachings cannot simply be satisfied by a government edict to "feed the poor." Commanding "Let there be light!" works fine for God, but for mortal beings, edicts don't carry the same punch.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has long supported government interference in the economy as a means to help the poor. But we suspect the bishops haven't fully thought this through: If God really did favor a top-down approach to poverty reduction, why wouldn't He establish a government with the power to wipe away poverty on demand instead of leaving things to chance and the possibility that someone like Mr. Ryan would come along and mess up His plans?

Perhaps we dehumanize the poor when we treat them as nothing more than problems to be solved, and we dehumanize the rich when we treat them as wallets to be picked.

Wealth and poverty are catalysts for bringing the rich and the poor together in community, and community is the hallmark of the church's mission on Earth. Government is not community. Government is one of community's tools, a coercive one we use when it is necessary to force people to behave in ways they would not otherwise behave voluntarily.



Associated Press

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' biannual meeting

But that word—voluntarily—is key, and it's where Mr. Ryan's religious detractors go awry: Charity can only be charity when it is voluntary. Coerced acts, no matter how beneficial or well-intentioned, cannot be moral. If we force people to give to the poor, we have stripped away the moral component, reducing charity to mere income redistribution. And if one really is as good as the other, the Soviets demonstrated long ago that it can be done far more efficiently without the trappings of church and religion.

All people have the moral obligation to care for those who are less fortunate. But replacing morality with legality is the first step in replacing church, religion and conscience with government, politics and majority vote. Coercing people to feed the poor simply substitutes moral poverty for material poverty.

The bishops dance with the devil when they invite government to use its coercive power on their behalf, and there's no clearer example than the Affordable Care Act. They happily joined their moral authority to the government's legal authority by supporting mandatory health insurance. They should not have been surprised when the government used its reinforced power to require Catholic institutions to pay for insurance plans that cover abortions and birth control.

To paraphrase J.R.R. Tolkien (a devoted Catholic), the government does not share power. Paul Ryan knows this. The bishops would be wise to listen to him.

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